

The MARDI GRAS MYSTERY

by H. Bedford Jones

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—During the height of the New Orleans carnival season Jachin Fell, wealthy though somewhat mysterious citizen, and Dr. Ansley, are discussing a series of robberies by an individual known as the Midnight Masquer, who, invariably attired as an aviator, has long defied the police. Joseph Mallard, wealthy banker, is giving a ball that night, at which the Masquer has threatened to appear and rob the guests. Fell and Ansley, on their way to the affair, meet a girl dressed as Columbine, seemingly known to Fell, but masked, who accompanies them to the ball.

CHAPTER II.—Lucie Ledanois, recently the ward of her uncle, Joseph Mallard, is the Columbine.

CHAPTER III.—In his library Joseph Mallard and a group of friends are held up and robbed by the Midnight Masquer.

CHAPTER IV.—Lucie Ledanois, the last of an old family, is in straitened circumstances. Joseph Mallard's handling of her funds has been unfortunate. Fell is an old friend of her parents and deeply interested in the girl. Henry Gramont, really the prince de Gramont, son of a French father and an American mother, but who spurns the title of prince, is enamored of Lucie and believes himself a not unskilled sailor.

CHAPTER V

The Masquer Unmasked.

In New Orleans one may find pensions in the old quarter—the quarter which is still instinct with the pulse of old-world life. These pensions do not advertise. The average tourist knows nothing of them. Even if he knew, indeed, he might have some difficulty in obtaining accommodations, for it is not nearly enough to have the money; one must also have the introductions, come well recommended, and be under the tongue of good repute.

Gramont had obtained a small apartment on pension—a quiet and severely refitted house in Burgundy street, maintained by a very proud old lady whose ancestors had come out of Canada with the Sieur d'Iberville. Here Gramont lived with Hammond, quite on a basis of equality, and they were very comfortable.

The two men sat smoking their pipes before the fireplace, in which blazed a small fire—more for good cheer than through necessity. It was Sunday evening.

Gramont stared into the flickering fire and sucked at his pipe. Suddenly he raised himself and shot a glance at Hammond.

"Sergeant! You seem to have a pretty good recollection of that night at the Lavergne house, when I found you entering and jumped on you."

"You bet I have!" Hammond chuckled. "When you'd knocked the goggles off me and we recognized each other—I'll tell you something big."

Gramont smiled. "How many places had you robbed up to then? Three, wasn't it?"

"Three is right, cap'n," was the unashamed response.

"We haven't referred to it very often, but now things have happened," Gramont's face took on harsh lines of determination. "Do you know, it was a lucky thing that you had no chance to dispose of the jewels and money you obtained?"

"No chance?" snorted the other. "No chance is right, cap'n! And I was sore, too. Say, they got a ring of crooks around this town you couldn't bust into with grenades! Listen here, and I'll tell you something big."

Hammond leaned forward, lowered his voice, and tapped at his pipe. "When I was a young fellow I lived in a little town up north—I ain't sayin' where. My old man had a livery stable there, see? Well, one night a guy come along and got the old man out of bed, and slips him fifteen hundred for a rig and a team, see? I drove the guy ten miles through the hills, and set him on a road he wanted to find."

"Now, that guy was the biggest crook in the country in them days—still is, I guess. He was on the dead run that night, to keep out of Leavenworth. He kept out, all right, and he's settin' in the game to this minute. Nobody never pinched him yet, and never will."

"Why?" "Because his gang runs back to politicians and rich guys all over the country. You ask anybody on the inside if they ever heard of Memphis Izzy Gumberts! Well, cap'n, I seen that very identical guy on the street the other day—I never could forget his ugly mug! And where he is, no outside crooks can get in, you believe me!"

"If that Memphis Izzy Gumberts, eh? What kind of a crook is he, sergeant?" "The big kind. You remember them Chicago lotteries? But you don't, of course. Well, that's his game—lotteries and such like."

Gramont's lips clenched for a minute, then he spoke with slow distinctness: "Sergeant, I'd have given five hundred dollars for that information a week ago!"

"Why?" Gramont shook his head. "Never mind. Forget it! Now, this stunt of yours was clever. You showed brains when you got yourself up as an aviator and pulled that stuff, sergeant. But you handled it brutally—terribly brutally."



"Hi! Memphis Izzy Gumberts, Eh? What Kind of a Crook is He, Sergeant?"

"It was a little raw, I guess," conceded Hammond. "I was up against it, that's all. When you took over the costume and began to get across with the Ruffles stuff—why, it was a pipe for you, cap'n! Look what we've done in a month. Six jobs, every one running off smooth as glass! Your notion of going to parties really dressed with some kind of loose robe over the flyin' duds was a scream! And then me running that motor with the cut-out, on—all them birds that never heard an airplane think you come and go by air, for certain! Nobody will ever find us out."

Gramont nodded thoughtfully. "Yes! But, sergeant, how about the quiet little man who came along last night at the Mallard house and asked about the car? Perhaps he had discovered you had been running the engine?"

"Hi!" Hammond snifted in scorn. "He wasn't no dick."

"Well, I was followed today; at least, I think I was. And let me tell you something about that same quiet little man! His name is Jachin Fell."

"Heluva name," commented Hammond, and wrinkled up his brow. "Jachin, huh? Seems like I've heard the name before. Out of the Bible, ain't it? Something about Jachin and Boaz?"

"I imagine so." Gramont smiled as he replied. "This chap Fell is sharp, confoundedly sharp!" he went on, while the chauffeur listened with frowning intentness. I think that he is on to me, and is trying to get the goods on me."

"Oh!" said Hammond. "And someone was trailin' you? Think he's put the bulls' eye?"

Gramont shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. He almost caught me last night. We'll have to get rid of that aviator's suit at once, and of the lot altogether. I suppose you've reconciled yourself to returning the stuff?"

Hammond stirred uneasily, and laid down his pipe.

"Look here, cap'n," he said, earnestly. "I wasn't runnin' a holdup game because I liked it, and I wasn't doing it for the fun of the thing, like you are. I was dead broke, I hadn't any hope left, and I didn't care a damn whether I lived or died—that's of the deal! Right there, you come along and picked me up."

"You give me a job. What's more, you've treated me white, cap'n. You've given me something decent to live for—to make good because you got some faith in me! Why, when you went out on that first job of ours, you know it like to broke me up?"

"It did. Only, when we got home that night and you said it was all a joke, and you'd send back the loot later on, then I began to feel better about it."

Gramont nodded in comprehension of the other's feeling. "It's not been altogether a joke, sergeant," he said, gravely. "To tell the truth, I did start it as a joke, but soon afterward I learned something that led me to keep it up. I kept it up until I could hit the Mallard house. It was my intention to turn up at the Comus ball, on Tuesday night, and there make public restitution of the stuff—but that's impossible now. I dare not risk it! That man Fell is too smart."

"You're not goin' to pull the trick again, then?" queried Hammond, eagerly. "No, I'm through. I've got what I wanted. Still, I don't wish to return the stuff before Wednesday—Ash Wednesday, the end of the carnival season. Suppose you get out the loot and find me some boxes. And be sure they have no name on them or any store labels."

Hammond leaped up and vanished in the room adjoining. Presently he returned, bearing several cardboard boxes, which he dumped on the center table. "I'm blamed glad you're done, believe me!" he uttered, fervently, glancing up at Gramont. "Far's I'm concerned I don't care much, but I'd

sure hate to see the bulls turn in a guy like you, cap'n. Here we are. Want me to keep each bunch separate, don't you?"

"Sure, I'll be writing some notes to go inside."

Gramont went to a built writing desk in the corner of the room, and sat down. He took out his notebook, tore off several sheets, and from his pocket produced a pencil having an extremely hard lead. He wrote a number of notes, which, except for the addresses, were identical in content:

"Dear Sir: I inclose herewith certain jewelry and articles, also currency, recently obtained by me under your kind auspices."

"I trust that you will assume the responsibility of returning these things to the various guests who lost them while under your roof. I regret any discomfort occasioned by my taking them as a loan, which I now return. Please convey to the several owners my profound esteem and my assurance that I shall not in future appear to trouble anyone, the carnival season having come to an end, and with it my little jest."

"THE MIDNIGHT MASQUER."

Gathering up these notes in his hand, Gramont went to the fireplace. He tossed the pencil into the fire, following it with the notebook.

"Can't take chances with that man Fell," he explained. "All ready, sergeant. Let's go down the list one by one."

From the trunk Hammond produced ticketed packages, which he placed on the table. Gramont selected one, opened it, carefully packed the contents in one of the boxes, placed the proper addressed note on top, and handed it to the chauffeur.

"Wrap it up and address it. Give the return address of John Smith, Bayou Teche."

One by one they went through the packages of loot in the same manner. Before them on the table, as they worked, glittered little heaps of rings, brooches, watches, currency; jewels that flashed garishly with colored fires; historic and famous jewels plucked from the aristocratic heart of the southland, heirlooms of a past generation side by side with platinum crudities of the present fashion.

There had been heartburnings in the loss of these things, Gramont knew. He could picture to himself something of what had followed his robberies: family quarrels, new purchases in the gem marts, bitter reproaches, fresh mortgages on old heritages, vexations of wealthy dowagers, shrugs of unconcern by the nouveaux riches; perchance lives altered—divorces—

"There's a lot of human life behind these baubles, sergeant," he reflected aloud, a cold smile upon his lips as he worked. "When they come back to their owners, I'd like to be hovering around in an invisible mantle to watch results! Could we only know it, we're probably affecting the lives of a great many people—for good and ill. These things stand for money; and there's nothing like money, or the lack of it, to guide the destinies of people."

"You said it," and Hammond grinned. "I'm here to prove it, ain't it? I ain't pulling no more gunplay, now I got me a steady job."

"And a steady friend, old man," added Gramont. "Did it occur to you that maybe I was as much in need of a friend as you were?"

He had come in the last box, now that which must go to Joseph Mallard. On top of the money and stuff plus which he placed in the box he laid a thin packet of papers. He tapped them with his finger. "Those papers, sergeant! To get them, I've been playing the whole game. To get them and not to let their owner suspect that I was after them! Now they're going back to their owner."

"Who's he?" demanded Hammond. "Young Mallard—son of the banker. He roped me into an oil company; caught me, like a sucker, almost the first week I was here. I put pretty near my whole wad into that company of his."

"You mean he stung you?" "Not yet," Gramont smiled coldly, harshly. "I fell right enough—but I'll come out on top of the heap."

The other frowned. "I don't get you, cap'n. Some kind of stock deal?" "Yes, and no," Gramont paused, and seemed to choose his words with care. "Miss Ledanois, the lady who was driving with us this afternoon, is an old friend of mine. I've known for some time that somebody was fleecing her. I suspected that it was Mallard the elder, for he has had the handling of her affairs for some time past. Now, however, those papers have given me the truth. He was straight enough with her; his son was the man."

"He worked on his father, made his father sell land owned by Miss Ledanois, and he himself reaped the profits. There are notes and stock issues among those papers that give his whole game away, to my eyes. By the way, get that tin box out of my trunk, will you? I want to take my stock certificates with me in the morning, and must not forget them."

Hammond disappeared into the adjoining room.

Gramont sat gazing at the boxes before him. He shook his head gloomily, and his eyes clouded. "All wasted—the whole effort!" he murmured. "I thought it might lead to something, but all it has given me is the reward of saving myself and possibly retrieving Lucie. As for the larger game, the bigger quarry—it's all wasted. I haven't unraveled a single thread; the first real clue came to me tonight, purely by accident. Memphis Izzy Gumberts! That's the lead to follow! I'll get rid of this Midnight Masquer foolishness and go after the real game."

Gramont was to discover that it is not nearly so easy to be rid of folly as it is to do the jester's cap and bells; a fact which one Simplicissimus had discovered to his sorrow three hundred years earlier. But, as Gramont was not versed in the line of literature, he yet had the discovery ahead of him.



"All Wasted—the Whole Effort!" He murmured.

Hammond re-entered the room with the tin box, from which Gramont took his stock certificates issued by Bob Mallard's oil company. He pocketed the shares.

"I'll go to Mallard the banker—Joseph Mallard—first thing in the morning, and offer him my stock. He'll be mighty glad to get it at a discount, knowing that it is in his son's company. You see, the son doesn't confide in the old man particularly. I'll let the father win a little money on the deal with me, and by doing this I'll manage to save the greater part of my investment."

"Holy mackerel!" Hammond exploded in a burst of laughter as he caught the idea. "Say, if this ain't the richest thing ever pulled! When the crash comes, the fancy kid will be stinging his dad good and hard, eh?" "Exactly; and I think his dad can afford to be stung much better than I can," agreed Gramont, cheerfully. "Now let's take those packages and stow them away in the luggage compartment of the car. I'm getting nervous at the thought of having them around here, and they'll be perfectly safe there overnight—safer there than here, in fact. Tomorrow you can take the car out of town and send the packages by parcels post from some small town."

"In that way they ought to be delivered here on Wednesday. You'd better wear one of my suits, leaving your chauffeur's outfit here, and don't halt the car in front of the post office where you mail the packages."

"I get you," assented Hammond, sagely. "But what about them aviator's clothes?" "Take them with you—better get them wrapped up here and now. You can toss them into a ditch anywhere."

Hammond obeyed. Ten minutes afterward the two men left the room, carrying the packages of loot and the bundle containing the aviator's uniform. They descended to the courtyard in the rear of the house. Here was a small garden, with a fountain in its center. Behind this were the stables, which had long been disused as such, and which were now occupied only by the car of Gramont.

It was with undisguised relief that Gramont now saw the stuff actually out of the house. Within the last few hours he had become intensely afraid of Jachin Fell. Concentrating himself upon the man, picking up information guardedly, he had that day assimilated many small items which increased his sense of peril from that quarter. Straws, no more, but quite significant straws. Gramont realized clearly that if the police ever searched his rooms and found this loot, he would be lost. There could be no excuse that would hold water for a minute against such evidence.

In the garage Hammond switched on the lights of the car. By the glow they disposed their burdens in the luggage compartment of the tonneau, which he held them neatly. The compartment closed and locked, they returned into the house and dismissed the affair as settled.

Upon the following morning Gramont, who usually breakfasted on pension with his hostess, had barely seated himself at the table when he perceived the figure of Hammond at the rear entrance of the dining room. The chauffeur beckoned him hastily.

"Come out here, cap'n!" Hammond was breathing heavily, and seemed to be in some agitation. "Want to show you something!"

Gramont rose and followed Hammond out to the garage, much to his amazement. The chauffeur halted beside the car and extended him a key, pointing to the luggage compartment.

"Here's the key—you open her!" "What's the matter, man?" "The stuff's gone!"

Gramont seized the key and opened the compartment. It proved empty indeed. He stared up into the face of Hammond, who was watching in dogged silence.

"I knew you'd suspect me," broke out the chauffeur, but Gramont interrupted him curtly.

"Don't be a fool; nothing of the sort. Was the garage locked?" "Yes, and the compartment, too! I came out to look over that out tire, and thought I'd make sure the stuff was safe."

"We're up against it, that's all. Someone must have been watching us last night, eh?" "The guy that trailed you yesterday, most like," agreed Hammond, dolefully. "You think they got us, cap'n? What can we do?"

"Do?" Gramont shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Nothing except to wait and see what happens next! I don't touch that compartment door. I want to examine it later."

Hammond gazed admiringly after him as he crossed the garden. "If you ain't a cool hand, I'm a Dutchman," he murmured, and followed his master.

(Continued next week)

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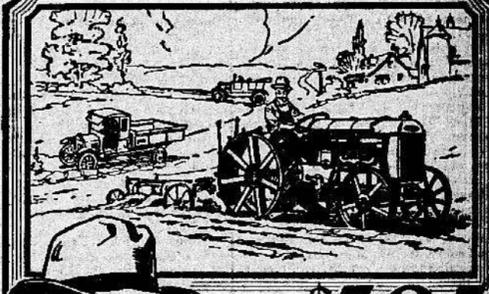
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